Allan Bloom and America

The Closing of the American Mind

Allan Bloom

New York: Simon and Schuster

392 pp., $7.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Thomas G. West

Allan Bloom introduced me to the study of political philosophy in three fine courses at Cornell in the mid-1960s. For that I will always be grateful. Political philosophy has been decisive for my life, just as it is for Bloom's. Yet I am about to criticize Bloom's book. I do not wish to be ungrateful. I offer my criticism in the spirit of Bloom's teacher and mine, Leo Strauss, and in the spirit of those classical political philosophers whose writings Bloom and Strauss have pointed us to throughout their careers. I mean to practice what Bloom preached.

The Closing of the American Mind is a diagnosis of the intellectual ills of our day, and, if it is not a prescription, it contains at least some suggestions for a cure. The book is most sound, I will argue, in its description of current pathologies. It is partly sound, partly unsound in its account of their origin. It is least sound in its prescription for their healing.

Bloom begins by examining the students in our prestige universities, and he finds them deficient in moral formation, in their reading of serious books, in musical tastes, and above all in eros. They have no love in their souls, no longing for anything high or great. Their minds are empty, their characters weak, and their bodies sated with rock and roll and easy sex. These students come equipped with a simple-minded relativism that is quick to close off all discussion with the tag, "Who's to say what's right and wrong?" Their relativism justifies an easygoing openness to everything, an openness which expresses their incapacity for being serious about anything. Their proclaimed openness, in fact, turns out to be a dogmatic closedness toward moral virtue no less than toward real thoughtfulness. They are "spiritually detumescent."

Toward the end of the book Bloom turns to their teachers, who are even worse than the students. They carry on the routine of education out of habit and as a job. When it came to the crunch during the so-called student unrest of the 1960s, they collapsed, because they believed in no principles that would justify resistance to barbarians. And so the left-wing thugs took over Cornell without opposition.

The cause of our current malaise, in Bloom's diagnosis, is modern philosophy, which has infected us in two ways—through politics and through 19th and 20th century continental European thought. As for politics, America was founded on modern principles of liberty and equality which we got from Hobbes and Locke. Liberty turned out to mean freedom from all self-restraint, and equality turned out to mean the destruction of all differences of rank and even of nature. Our Founders may have acted, or have pretended to act, "with a firm reliance on divine providence" (Declaration of Independence), but their natural-rights philosophy came from the atheists Hobbes and Locke. (Bloom hedges on whether the Founders were self-conscious atheists or merely the dupes of clever and lying philosophers.) Bloom characterizes the Lockean

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THE CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS

Old Thinking for New Suckers

Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World

Mikhail Gorbachev

New York: Harper & Row

225 pp., $19.95

Reviewed by Harry V. Jaffa

This offering by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. reminds me of a *New Yorker* cartoon of some years back. Company big shots are sitting around the conference table, in the middle of which is a large box. On the box is emblazoned the word "NEW." A neophyte among those present asks, "But what's new about it?" To which he receives the reply, "The NEW is what's new about it."

As far as I can see, Gorbachev's new thinking and Gary Hart's new ideas stand about on the same level. The former involved stamping a NEW label on some old Marxist-Leninist garbage, and the suckers are lining up to buy it—with the President of the United States at the head of the queue! It is page after page of the emptiest, windiest—and most God-awfully repetitious—rhetoric, and resembles nothing so much as the text of one of those seven-hour speeches that the Soviet leadership gives to the Supreme Soviet, or at Party Congresses when they convene. I think I'd rather be tortured by the KGB, in the basement of the Lubyanka, than have to sit through one. If you live in that environment, you learn to sleep through the bulk of such speeches—with your eyes open, however—and to applaud on cue. But you also learn to become wide awake on a sudden when, by one or two words buried in the meaningless muck, hints are given of forthcoming changes in policy or personnel among the top brass.

In a recent newspaper article entitled "Useful Idiots: Then and Now," I reviewed the steady rhythm of the process of over sixty years—beginning with Lenin's *New* Economic Plan—whereby the U.S.S.R. recovers the economic strength lost to the ravages of communism by periods of détente (or peaceful coexistence, or whatever it is called in its latest reincarnation). When the sun shines, as in Aesop's fable, the West removes its overcoat—that is to say, it disarms itself, while lending the money and exporting the technology that prepares the U.S.S.R. for its next round of aggression.

Here are some passages—they might be taken almost at random—from *Perestroika.*

> *Some politicians and media, particularly in the United States, have been trying to present perestroika as a drive for "liberalization" caused by Western pressure. Of course, one cannot help paying tribute to Western propaganda officials, who have skillfully played a verbal game of democracy. But we will believe in the democratic nature of Western societies when their workers and office employees start electing the owners of factories and plants, bank presidents, etc., when their media put corporations, banks, and their bosses under a barrage of regular criticism and start discussing the real processes inherent in Western countries, rather than engage in an endless and useless argument with politicians.* (pp. 127-8)

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Bloom

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doctrine of the Founders in this way:

> *[In the state of nature man] is on his own. God neither looks after him nor punishes him. Nature's indifference to justice is a terrible bereavement for man.... [This state of nature doctrine] produced, among other wonders, the United States.* (p. 163)

The practical result:

> *God was slowly executed here; it took two hundred years, but local theologians tell us He is now dead.* (p. 230)

Similarly, the Founders may have thought they were establishing a political order based on reason—Bloom stresses our initial claim to being the first political order so grounded—but the regime of reason turned out to be the regime where reason discovers the virtue of unleashing the passions. At first reason legitimates only the modest passions of industriousness and money-making. But having abandoned its older claim to be the rightful master of the soul, reason eventually lost its authority and became impotent against demands for self-indulgence and mindless self-expression. The story of America, according to Bloom, is a tale of the practical working out of the degradation inherent in the logic of our founding principles:

> *This is a regime founded by philosophers and their students.... Our story is the majestic and triumphant march of the principles of freedom and equality, giving meaning to all that we have done or are doing. There are almost no accidents; everything that happens among us is a consequence of one or both of our principles.... [T]he problem of nature [is] always present but always repressed in the reconstruction of man demanded by freedom and equality.* (p. 97)

Eventually, Bloom says, the infections occasioned by our political principles sapped the strength of religious faith and traditional morality. The relativism of today's students is, then, in Bloom's view, a perfect expression of the real soul of liberty, which from the start, in Hobbes's thought, meant that life had no intrinsic meaning. The anti-nature dogmas of women's liberation, which deny the obvious natural differences between men and women in the name of equality, are destroying the last remnants of the family, which had been the core of society through most of America's history. Likewise, the anti-nature dogmas of affirmative action—insisting that equal opportunity be suppressed until all categories of Americans come out exactly the same—deny the obvious natural differences among human beings in regard to ambition and intelligence.

Thus equality and liberty eventually produced self-satisfied relativism which sees no need to aspire to anything beyond itself—"spiritual detumescence." They also produced left-wing political movements which try to implement the "reconstruction of man demanded by freedom and equality" and which not only threaten but dominate important parts of our leading universities. Further, Hobbesian-Lockean liberty was also designed to liberate scientific technology in order to conquer nature and make life comfortable. The very idea of a conquest of nature implies disrespect for natural limits and has contributed to the decline of respect for nature's guidance in all areas of contemporary life.

The second cause of our problems today, Bloom tells us, is post-Lockean modern philosophy. The big names are Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, but their views have been popularized (and degraded) by such men as Marx, Freud, and Max Weber. Their ideas have worked their way into our universities and our speech, giving us "The Self," "Creativity," "Culture," and "Values" (four of Bloom's chapter titles). These continental writers, more radical than Hobbes and Locke, all strongly denounced "bourgeois society," i.e., democracy American-style. From them we have learned to think of ourselves as despicably low. Yet at the same time, we have vulgarized the grand conceptions especially of Rousseau and Nietzsche and fitted them into our own democratic prejudices. Thus every nursery-school child is encouraged to be "creative."

If I may elaborate on Bloom's analysis and follow out my own medical analogy, America's founding principles, taken from Hobbes and Locke, may be compared to the AIDS virus. The body into which AIDS insinuates itself may continue to appear healthy for many years before the symptoms reveal themselves. Thus, although our founding principles were atheistic and relativistic at bottom, the body politic continued to look healthy for about 180 years before the disease began to manifest itself openly.

Bloom is of course right when he says that Hobbes's notion of liberty cannot distinguish itself from license.... But the American Founders were not Hobbesians, however often Bloom and his students and friends may repeat the falsehood that they were.

The AIDS virus renders the body helpless before the attack of infectious diseases. It destroys the body's ability to distinguish good from evil viruses and opens it up to the penetration of evil. AIDS is the body's relativism, the self-destructive openness of the body's mind. Similarly, an AIDS-infected American mind loses its ability to tell the difference between healthful and harmful opinions. Salutary customs and traditions, such as moral self-restraint and the habits and attitudes necessary for sustaining family life, for seriousness of purpose, and ultimately for national survival, become indistinguishable from life-destroying doctrines and beliefs, such as the hostile teachings of 19th and 20th century German philosophy. The American mind, suffering from Hobbes-Locke induced AIDS—a liberty that has no respect for nature and natural limits—therefore not only fails to resist the destructive infection of Nietzsche-Heidegger, but with its false openness the American mind mindlessly welcomes the infection, thus bringing on what may be the terminal stage of the disease.[1]

Bloom also prescribes a cure for our malady. The cure is a Great Books education in the prestige universities, taught in the spirit of opening students' minds to the charms and challenge of "the philosophic experience." Of course Bloom is not so naive as to think that reading a few good old books will transform American political and intellectual life. He means that this sort of reading might help in restoring some sort of seriousness to education and therefore to life. Bloom readily acknowledges that this is a slender hope.

* * *

I myself cannot subscribe to Bloom's diagnosis of the problems of American education, although I do subscribe to the general features of his account of modern relativism and its dangers.

I can sum up my main objection in this way: Far from being the source of the problem, or an important source of it, America's founding principles are for us probably the only basis for its solution; far from being the equivalent of mental AIDS, our principles *are* our immune system. Bloom is of course right when he says that Hobbes's notion of liberty cannot distinguish itself from license. He is right that there can be no principled objection, on the basis of Hobbes's doctrine, to a government-sponsored effort to make men and women the same. Indeed, as is well known, there is in Hobbes's thought no principled objection to tyranny altogether, tyranny being nothing more than monarchy misliked, and monarchy being the form of government recommended by *Leviathan* But the American Founders were not Hobbesians, however often Bloom and his students and friends may repeat the falsehood that they were.

The Founders had a low opinion of Hobbes. James Wilson, one of the two or three most important men at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, once summed up his assessment of Hobbes by asserting that Hobbes's "narrow and hideous" theories are "totally repugnant to all human sentiment, and all human experience." Wilson says this in the context of affirming Lockean ideas about the natural rights of man. Similarly, Alexander Hamilton, in "The Farmer Refuted," attributed Hobbes's principles to the Tory Samuel Seabury.

> *His [Hobbes's] opinion was, exactly, coincident with yours [Seabury's], relative to man in a state of nature. He held, as you do, that he [man] was then perfectly free from the restraint of law and government. Moral obligation, according to him, is derived from the introduction of civil society; and there is no virtue, but what is purely artificial, the mere contrivance of politicians, for the maintenance of social intercourse. But the reason he ran into this absurd and impious doctrine was that he disbelieved the existence of an intelligent superintending principle, who is the governor and will be the final judge of the universe.*
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> *...To grant that there is a supreme intelligence who rules the world and has established laws to regulate the actions of his creatures; and still, to assert that man, in a state of nature, may be considered as perfectly free from all restraints of law and government, appear to a common understanding, altogether irreconcilable.*
>
> *Good and wise men, in all ages, have embraced a very dissimilar theory. They have supposed that the deity, from the relations we stand in, to himself and to each other, has constituted an eternal and immutable law, which is, indispensably,* obligatory *upon all mankind, prior to any human institution whatever.*
>
> *This is what is called the law of nature....* Upon this law, depend the natural rights of mankind.... (Emphasis added.)

The key point is that Hamilton, as did the other Founders, integrated Lockean language into a moral framework they had inherited from classical and medieval political philosophy and from their manly Protestantism. Nature and nature's God were the ultimate source of duty and right.

Against Hamilton, Bloom asserts, without the slightest attempt to prove it, that for Americans rights precede duties as a matter of course. He

implies that Hamilton is wrong about the state of nature, that the law of nature has no moral content, and that there is in America an abandonment from the start of any idea of duty or purpose in life beyond personal whims or commitments.

> *But in modern political regimes [such as America], where rights precede duties, freedom definitely has primacy over community, family, and even nature.* (p. 113)

Bloom also says the Enlightenment views of Hobbes and Locke were meant to liberate men "from God's tutelage" (p. 163). Thus Bloom attributes to America, and America's Founders, a view that Hamilton went out of his way to denounce as typical of the immoral Tory position! Solzhenitsyn better understood our founding when he said, "In American democracy at the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted because man is God's creature. ["All men are *created* equal."] That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, on the assumption of his constant religious responsibility. . . . We have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility." Bloom and I would agree that men today have forgotten God. But why accuse Hamilton, Washington, even Jefferson of things manifestly untrue?

Consider Jefferson:

> *Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath?*

Washington, far from viewing the Enlightenment as a challenge to religion, saw religion as beneficial to true enlightenment!

> *The foundation of our empire was not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition, but at an epoch when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined than at any former period. . . . [A]bove all, the pure and benign light of revelation ha[s] had a meliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of society. At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a nation, and if their citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.*

Similarly, Bloom mistakes the Founders' view of human nature, attributing to them a break with the classic view of man as a combination of reason and passion:

> *In the past it was thought that man is a dual being, one part of him concerned with the common good, the other with private interests. To make politics work, man, it was thought, has to overcome the selfish part of himself, to tyrannize over the merely private, to be virtuous. Locke...taught that no part of man is naturally directed to the common good and that the old way was both excessively harsh and ineffective, that it went against the grain. They experimented with using private interest for public interest, putting natural freedom ahead of austere virtue.* (p. 166-67)

On the contrary, the Founders always understood that "man is a dual being." *The Federalist* speaks of man throughout as both rational and passionate:

> *Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason without constraint.*

It is true of course that the Founders paid close attention to the problem of self-interest, and that they did everything they could to channel self-interest in the direction of the common good. (Plato, Aristotle, and all the classic writers on politics recommended similar devices linking self-interest to the common good, to "supply the defect of better motives.") But the Founders were far from indulging the Kantian delusion that a well-constructed constitution would work even for a nation of devils. This delusion is, to be sure, typical of those post-Rousseauan continental thinkers who abandoned human nature as the standard of political life. Hamilton once explicitly denounced it when he said, "It is always very dangerous to look to the vices of men for good."

The Founders were well aware of the need for public-spirited citizens. They anticipated with clarity the consequence of a loss of public virtue. They believed that a people accustomed to living however it pleased, who saw no higher purpose than, say, entertainment and having fun—a people incapable of *self-government* in the sense of controlling selfish passions and interests—would also be incapable of *self-government* in the sense of democracy, making public laws for themselves to live by. As Madison says in *The Federalist*:

> *Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities [men's capacity for virtue] in a higher degree than any other form.*

But if a people ever becomes slavishly lacking in self-restraint, if their "spirit shall ever be so far debased," they "will be prepared to tolerate anything but liberty."

The students described by Bloom in the first part of his book are indeed approaching the debased character which Madison feared. But it is not true that our Founders' principles and institutions sowed what we are now reaping. It can be shown, as I have done in "The Founders' View of Education," that they in fact did everything they could to form the character of the people to make them self-assertive, self-controlled republicans. For the moment I will merely mention John Adams' educational provisions in the Massachusetts Constitution, the surprisingly strict laws regulating the public morals passed in those years by state legislatures, and the intention of the American Constitution to rectify "an almost universal prostration of morals" caused by irresponsible actions of the several state governments which had "undermined the foundations of property and credit."

I could go on quoting the Founders—an exercise that might be useful for readers of Bloom's book, since he rarely if ever quotes Americans on America, but limits himself to the pronouncements of foreigners such as Hobbes, Locke, and Tocqueville. (I almost included Saul Bellow.) Instead, I will mention the one fact that is the most convincing piece of evidence to me about the source of America's current difficulties. If you look at the history of those changes in American education of which Bloom so justly complains, you find that those changes were always introduced by men who knew they were at odds with the people and the politicians who were formed by the Founders' principles. Those intellectuals who have been promoting for many decades the relativistic, anti-natural, and leftist dogmas prevailing today all hated the principles of the founding, and most of them said so openly and loudly. Their work could go forward only after the Founders' view of natural right and natural law had been discredited.

The first sustained attack on the founding principles was launched in the South before the Civil War by slaveholders and their apologists who wanted to get rid of natural rights so they could be free to continue to tyrannize their slaves. During the progressivist era there was a sustained denunciation of the founding, especially of the Constitution, and Woodrow Wilson among others attacked the Founders' views and institutions because, based as they were on the idea of individual rights, they stood in the way of massive state control of private life. More recently we have been subjected to constant vilifications of religion and morality in American life—Bloom mentions that nothing is less controversial in the prestige universities than such attacks—and these attacks have consistently included attacks on the idea of natural law and natural right.

But Bloom argues that the barbaric attacks on America in the 1960s were really a product of America itself, the unintended culmination of a doomed enlightenment enterprise.

> *The content of this morality [viz., that of the '60s at Cornell] was derived simply from the leading notions of modern democratic thought, absolutized and radicalized. Equality, freedom, peace, cosmopolitanism were the goods, the only goods.... They were inherent in our regime, they constituted its horizon.* (p. 326)

He makes this argument because he sees no principled distinction between liberty and equality as the Founders conceived them and liberty and equality as, say, Marx conceived them. In other words, since Bloom does not see the much more traditional character—and that means the *rational* character—of the Founders' view of liberty, he mistakes the source of the problem. Instead of debunking the founding (Bloom once rightly blamed a history teacher of his for this very thing), Bloom should be celebrating it as a fund of wisdom to be recovered for the sake of the very enterprise he wishes to foster. And instead of confusing the issue by speaking of Marxism as an extreme version of American egalitarianism, he should be vigorously denouncing Marxist hatred of political liberty, liberal education, and religion, the bulwarks of American constitutionalism.

Bloom's mistake about America proceeds, I believe, from two sources. First, he simply doesn't know much about America's origins. His own studies have been in the history of European political philosophy and European literature. And, not having studied America much himself, he has relied heavily, almost exclusively, on the facts that John Locke is America's philosopher, and that John Locke was a secret admirer and follower of Thomas Hobbes. But it is not possible to move from these facts to an account of America's founding that pays little or no attention to the actual writings and documents produced by the Founders themselves. For the question is, in what *sense* were the Founders Lockeans? Their writings show without doubt that the Founders' understanding of their own actions was entirely contrary to the deepest intention of the deeply radical Hobbes and Locke.

The history of modern political philosophy does have a logic of its own, as Leo Strauss has convincingly shown, which leads to increasingly radical statements culminating with Nietzsche in the denial of reason and philosophy itself. But intellectual history is not political history. As Charles Kesler once said, America is not just another chapter in the Strauss-Cropsey *History of Political Philosophy*.[2]

But there is a second reason for Bloom's mistake about America, and that stems from his own experience and taste. Bloom acknowledges that he never felt at home in the American midwest of his youth,

that there was nothing for him in the concerns of his high school classmates (p. 244), nor in the piety of his orthodox grandfather (p. 60). But when he arrived at the University of Chicago, he says, and saw its pseudo-Gothic towers, "[he] somehow sensed that [he] had discovered [his] life" (p. 243). He implies that he knew he had discovered it before he ever met his master Leo Strauss there, and I can believe it. Bloom is describing himself as an uprooted intellectual for whom traditional religion and "bourgeois society" mean nothing. For such a man, what incentive is there to study America with any sympathy? Far from being the land of the free and the home of the brave, the American Republic was for him a dreary desert from which he longed to escape. His oasis was the university, the Republic of Letters, and there he has stayed ever since. Of course he is very interested in America as it comes to sight through the students he teaches and the university that gives him his home. But everything outside the university, Bloom implies, is philistine, bourgeois, and contemptibly vulgar. Consider the snobbishness of this typical remark of his: "The importance of these [university] years for an American cannot be overestimated. They are civilization's only chance to get to him."

Is civilization only to be found in or through universities? Considering Bloom's own relentless indictment, one wonders whether civilization is to be found at all in the "best" universities (the only exception being an isolated, often embattled, teacher here or there). Why does Bloom not look to certain less prominent but more substantial colleges, where the trends he describes have sometimes been resisted more successfully than at the better-known institutions? Or, to put it more radically, why should we respect the modern university at all? If Bloom's story of its internal decay is true, as I am inclined to believe, it seems much more likely that, if civilization is to be preserved, it will be in spite of our universities, not because of them.

Tocqueville, an authority on America whom Bloom admires, would never have suggested that universities are our access to civilization (even in 1835, when they were so much sounder than today). Indeed, Tocqueville and Bloom differ profoundly in other ways as well. To exaggerate for clarity's sake: Tocqueville never stops celebrating the virtues of small-town life in America, with its strong Protestantism, its tight moralism, its close-knit families, and its human-scale democracy, while Bloom seems to value all this only as the source of strong prejudices the liberation from which will be all the more satisfying as Bloom midwifes it. Otherwise Bloom seems ready to chime in with the Rousseauan-Nietzschean condemnation of bourgeois life.

In this respect, without intending it, he is in agreement with, for example, the recent opponents of Judge Robert Bork, who (unlike Bloom) want to replace the America of equal opportunity and moral self-restraint with a society of forced egalitarianism. In such a society, liberty will be abolished in favor of a false conception of equality (it is already in the course of being abolished), and the kind of education which Bloom praises will disappear.

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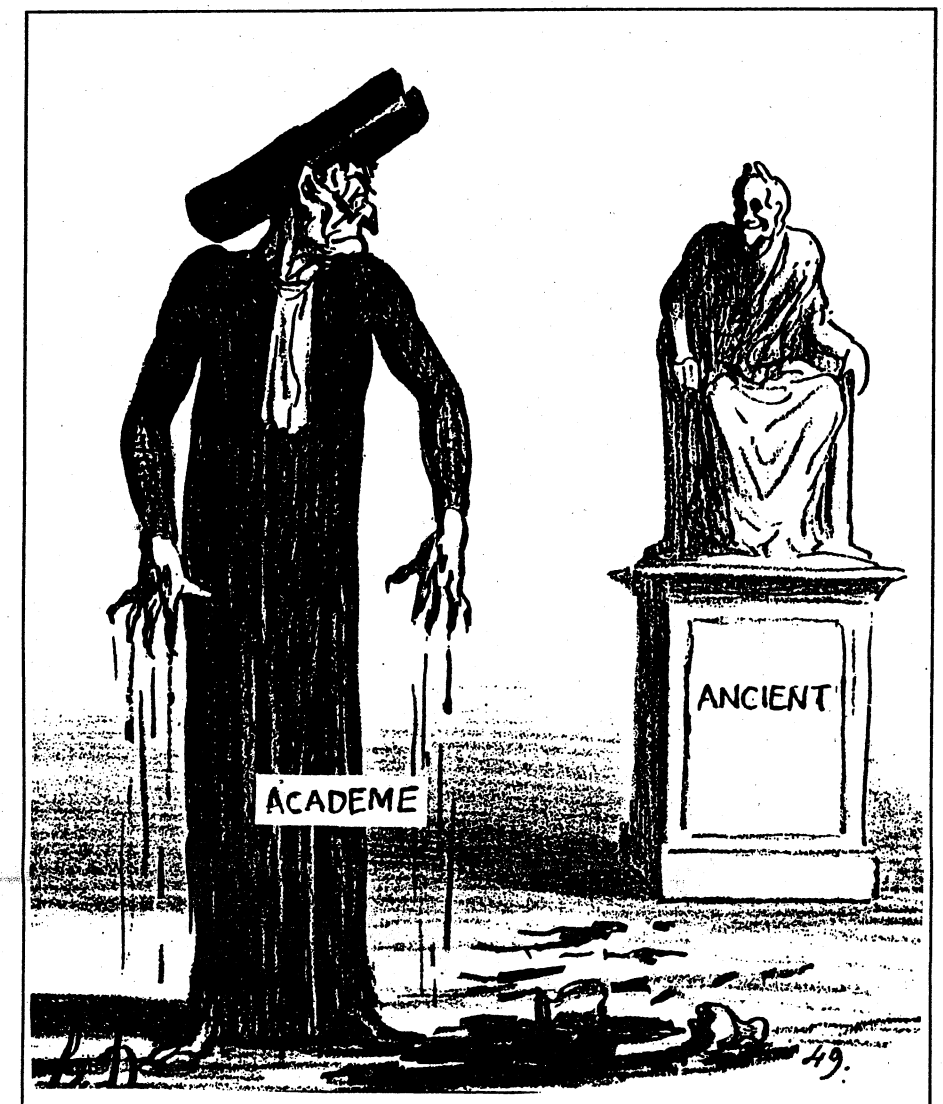
This leads to Bloom's prescription for a cure to our ills. It centers on the university. Bloom is firmly against the idea that the university should serve society. In this he opposes the Founders, particularly Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. Jefferson's conception of university education was public-spirited. The main intent is "to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend." This is to be done by studies in "the principles and structure of government." "Political economy" is to be learned in order to promote public industry. Students are also to be enlightened with "mathematical and physical sciences, which advance the arts, and administer to the health, the subsistence, and comforts of human life." Finally, the university is to "develop their reasoning faculties" and "enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order." All of this is in order "to form them to habits of reflection and correct actions, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves."

Bloom's university, on the other hand, is to be explicitly devoted to cultivating the philosophic life, by pointing students *away* from their own countries and traditions. But in the current climate, which is already all too willing to question the value of American society and government, would this orientation not tend to ossify the prevailing prejudices? Nietzsche, one of Bloom's authorities on the current malaise, rightly points out the debilitating effect of the Great Books education in our world (in a passage I first read during a course I took with Bloom at Cornell in 1965): such an education, says Nietzsche, promotes accumulation of knowledge of other times and places, without providing a direction. "It is not a real education but a kind of knowledge about education, a complex of various thoughts and feelings about it, from which no decision about its direction can come." In healthier times, education in the best writings of the past is not for the sake of objective consideration, but "always has a reference to the end of life, and is under its absolute rule and direction" (*Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*, sec. 4). Bloom would agree, but he makes the end of life "philosophy," forgetting, it seems, the lesson of the philosophers that all human beings except philosophers need a moral and political orientation. Without that, a Bloomian education will produce not Socrateses but pale shadows of Socrates—intellectuals.[3]



Je voulais la lui jeter et c'est moi qui me suis sali.

Bloom is not indifferent to the needs of society. His final paragraph suggests that a return to the classics may also have a decisive effect on "the fate of freedom in the world." But Bloom would make the public mission of the university anti-social, or rather trans-social, any benefit to society being an accidental by-product, while Jefferson and I would make its public mission primarily political, allowing "the philosophic experience" to be cultivated without official sanction.

Is not Jefferson's university closer to what Nietzsche, Plato, and indeed anyone of common sense, would consider appropriate for the future leaders of society, not to mention future philosophers? His university would certainly accommodate the chance philosopher in one niche or other of the curriculum. But does it really make sense to attempt to go beyond this, to institutionalize an education to the philosophic life in a conventional academic structure? In the end it is who happens to be teaching and who happens to be learning that will make all the difference. Philosophers, like Caesars, can appear anywhere, and they can take care of themselves. The attempt to plan for them seems to me to betray a tendency on Bloom's part to equate, against the letter of his intention, the philosopher and the intellectual. Finally, is it really philistine to structure the university with a view to service to society, above all in attempting to educate future statesmen in the principles of republican government, but on a lesser scale training men and women to be useful to their society and to themselves? That is something that can be understood and done well by those who are far from the exalted heights of

philosophy. As Rousseau, another of Bloom's authorities, reminds us, "He who will be a bad versifier or a subaltern geometer all his life would perhaps have become a great cloth maker."

The best and most accurate parts of *The Closing of the American Mind* are the beginning and end, those parts that deal directly with university life in modern America. That is what Bloom knows best because he has been immersed in it and has observed it closely since his youth. Bloom spends a lot of time with students and professors, and he has a gift for penetrating their facades and seeing what they are really like. The observations in these pages of the book, which are of course deliberately and delightfully exaggerated, reveal in the most memorable way the tendency of American young people and of university education. Particularly good are the sections on the debilitating effect of divorce on children and on their capacity to learn and love, on the sad consequences of affirmative action on black students, on the loveless love lives of so many students, and on the tremendous importance of rock and roll for young people and how it degrades their souls.

Here is where the book is strongest, and this is what seems to have made the book a best-seller. It is from these pages, at any rate, that the quotations in the reviews seem to come. However, this may not be as hopeful a sign as Bloom, according to an interview, seems to think. About ten years ago, a highly popular book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, was written by Christopher Lasch, reputedly a Marxist. I have heard that this was Jimmy Carter's favorite book. At any rate, Carter is said to have used it in preparing his famous "energy crisis" speech, which spoke of our national malaise. The point of the speech was to promote the creation of yet another federal bureaucracy, this one to administer the country's energy policy from Washington. Much of Lasch's description of America's ills bears a striking similarity to Bloom's, at least superficially. (I counted at least fifteen parallel observations.) Like Bloom, Lasch pounds away at the principle of individual liberty and blames a good deal of our malaise on that principle. Considering Lasch's leftist political orientation, however, one wonders how much of the praise of Bloom's book, particularly by the critics, who are almost all liberals, comes from those hostile to liberal democracy and constitutional government.

Someone might ask, why are you being so hard on a book that might do a lot of good, written by the man who happens to be the one who introduced you to the study of political philosophy? To compare small things to great, Aristotle set the example in his treatment of his former teacher Plato. Truth comes before friendship, though it need not destroy friendship. It seems to me that Bloom's low view of America, and the consequent turning away from any serious political concern in his conception of American education, vitiates the good effect of his book's sound parts.

Because he feels so much at home with intellectuals, Bloom overlooks politics. He is therefore unable to appreciate that the cause of sound education in this country is much more likely to be supported by "bourgeois" politicians than by sophisticated intellectuals. Bloom has contempt for those politicians. But it was not the Nixons of America who capitulated to the Cornell blacks in the 1960s. Certainly Nixon's response would have been quite different from that of Bloom's students, who expressed their sovereign contempt for those thugs by passing out xeroxed passages from Plato's *Republic* (p. 332). That impotent gesture did nothing to save Cornell from barbarism. But for Richard Nixon, one of the few public men willing to act against the tide in those mad years (and their madness is still with us), Bloom has only a sneer (p. 329). ■

[1] The idea that America was AIDS-ridden from the start was suggested by Judge Robert Bork: American constitutional law seems to be "pathologically lacking in immune defenses" against "the intellectual fevers of the general society." (*Tradition and Morality in Constitutional Law* [Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1984], quoted in Harry V. Jaffa, "Equality and the Founding," presented at the Conference on Equality and the Constitution, San Bernardino State University, April 1985.) Bork's position is even more radical than Bloom's: Bork believes that there is no theory at all inherent in our political institutions. But the result is the same: "our constitutional law [is] constantly catching cold" from the most radical intellectual opinions of the day. Bork then goes on, incoherently, to *celebrate* the fact that our Constitution has no theory of its own!

[2] Kesler is the author of the best review of Bloom's book published to date: See *The American Spectator*, August 1987, pp. 14-17. Several of the arguments in the present review are anticipated in Kesler's.

[3] Sanderson Schaub raised this point against Eva Brann's similar endorsement of the St. John's College curriculum in her *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*: See *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 4, p. 177.

Civil Libertarianism

Changing Course: Civil Rights at the Crossroads
Clint Bolick
New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Press
160 pp., $21.95

For a young attorney, Clint Bolick has great political ambitions, namely to revive the civil rights revolution on libertarian and conservative terms. His project involves: first, a faithful summary of the history of civil rights in America, so that its meaning becomes clear; and second, proposals for a new civil rights strategy that would liberate blacks, along with other Americans, by guaranteeing economic liberty. Against the prevalent collectivist and race-conscious mentalities, Bolick contends that "the essence of civil rights is that every individual possesses the authority to control his or her own destiny."

Bolick, formerly a civil rights attorney in the Reagan administration, does enormous political service by establishing both a theory and practice for a libertarian, conservative civil rights agenda. The arguments contained in this short work become essential reading for anyone interested in civil rights, for they go to the heart of the issues fiercely debated today.

Bolick argues that the civil rights revolution of the 1960s succeeded in establishing legally the ideals of equal opportunity demanded by America's founding documents and natural rights political philosophers such as John Locke and Thomas Paine, who inspired the Founders. America's history—not just black history—is the unfolding of the ideal of individual freedom for *all* Americans. Bolick succinctly describes freedom's friends and enemies. But he errs in praising the abolitionists, who were no friends of the Constitution, and he thereby denigrates their enemy, Abraham Lincoln. This major error follows from Bolick's Hayekian "negative concept" of freedom—that freedom consists in the lack of compulsion.

In Bolick's view, the civil rights movement, including the 1954 school desegregation case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, strove to establish a color-blind society. But, Bolick to the contrary, Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion in *Brown* did not decisively overturn the 1896 decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* affirming the constitutionality of segregation. For Warren based his opinion on the swamp of social science, not the bedrock of natural rights. Thus later justices could write opinions defending governmental classification by race (such as the *Bakke* case, which Bolick subsequently overpraises, and *Johnson v. Transportation Agency* in 1987). Bolick correctly blames an acceptance of collectivism, the replacement of equality of opportunity with equality of result, and an increase in black race consciousness for the trend toward racial preference policies, but he exaggerates the shift in legal principle from the days of segregation.

Like his fellow libertarians who hold to a negative concept of freedom and share with Karl Marx the notion that political power can be abolished, Bolick claims that "the judiciary is the only branch of government capable of safeguarding individual rights."

Unfortunately, Bolick maintains, these legal advances have not yet produced concomitant economic or social benefits. In the second part of his book he blames recent education, welfare, and racial preference policies, for setting blacks back. He challenges civil rights leaders to consider an array of reforms, many of which are adopted from scholars such as Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams. Bolick would reenergize the civil rights movement by making economic liberty a principal tenet. Thus he adds a new dimension to diverse recommendations such as education vouchers, enterprise zones, and abolition of licensing and minimum wage laws. His perspective would reestablish civil rights as individual natural rights.

One would think that such a sensible program could gain support in the elected branches of governments. Yet Bolick apparently places greater faith in an activist judiciary, which would strike down as unconstitutional the barriers to black progress in laws restricting economic activity. Here his libertarianism (visible earlier as well as in his strictures against "victimless crimes," such as drug usage) makes conservatives part company from him. Like his fellow libertarians who hold to a negative concept of freedom and share with Karl Marx the notion that political power can be abolished, Bolick claims that "the judiciary is the only branch of government capable of safeguarding individual rights." Thus he underestimates the dangers of giving more power to the nondemocratic branches and displays a Hobbesian skepticism about self-government. (It is interesting to note in this connection that he never mentions the 1965 Voting Rights Act.) But even this major disagreement can hardly diminish the gratitude friends of civil rights across the political spectrum ought to display for Bolick's work. ■